How Problematic for Morality Is Internalism about Reasons?

Simon Robertson

1.

One of the unifying themes of Bernard Williams’ work in ethical theory has been his insistence that “there are only internal reasons for action”.1 The characterising claim of his internalism is that true reason statements “display a relativity […] to the agent’s subjective motivational set” or “S”.2 Internalism has met with considerable resistance, not least from those concerned to defend certain views about morality and moral obligation. As John McDowell puts it, if internalism is correct then “ethical reasons are reasons only for those for whom they are internal reasons: only for those who have motivations to which ethical considerations speak”3. The worry is that if an agent’s reasons for action display an essential relativity to his motivational repertoire, and if ethical reasons have no pull on him, he will have no reason to do that which morality requires. Derek Parfit voices his unease at this implication, writing, “Those who were sufficiently ruthless, or amoral, would have no duties – and […] could not be held to be acting wrongly”.4 However, the relation between internalism and morality is more complex than sometimes assumed. To bring out one aspect of these complexities, this paper examines Tim Scanlon’s recent argument against internalism. The aim is twofold: to defend internalism against Scanlon’s objection and, drawing upon that defence, to reassess how problematic for morality internalism really is. The conclusion will be that the source of the internalist challenge is importantly different, indeed more pressing, than usually thought.

2.

Let us characterise William’s internalism as follows:

A has a reason to φ iff A has a motive which would be served by his φ-ing5

---

1 Williams 1995, 35.
2 Williams 1981, 102.
3 McDowell 1995, 68.
5 See Williams 1981, 101. I think there are better formulations available (Williams has modified his internalist analysans several times, most recently at Williams 2001, 91) but this is the most familiar and the one I shall continue to use (nothing substantive hangs on this choice). Note, also, though that I treat this as a bi-conditional. Although Williams claims not to defend the right-hand side as sufficient, he suspects that it is and frequently assumes so (see Williams 1981, 107ff; 1995, 35–6, 39; 2001, 91).
Although much has been said about the detail of the analysans, I wish to make two preliminary points about the analysandum. Consider, first, the following passage. Williams writes,

> It is worth remarking the point, already implicit, that an internal reason statement does not apply only to that action which is the uniquely preferred result of the deliberation. ‘A has reason to φ’ does not mean ‘the action which A has overall, all-in, reason to do is φ-ing’. He can have reason to do a lot of things which he has other and stronger reasons not to do.6

To say that ‘A has a reason to φ’ need not express a univocal normative conclusion. Indeed, such a locution leaves the weight or degree of reason completely unspecified. This does not imply that the reason under analysis is characteristically weaker than other reasons. Nonetheless, even the weakest of reasons is a reason. So we are in the realm of pro tanto reasons. Pro tanto reasons and conclusive reasons or oughts are often conflated, not only by many of his commentators but also sometimes by Williams. At one point, for example, Williams takes the internalist analysans as “implying not just that A has a reason to φ, but that he or she has more reason to do that than to do anything else”.7 It is a mistake to confuse these, however, since A may have many motives not of all of which plausibly give rise to actions he has most reason to perform. So it is important to distinguish pro tanto reasons from oughts. We shall be focusing on pro tanto reasons.

Second, we often want to know not only whether an agent has some reason or another but what that reason actually is – the conditions under which this particular consideration or fact is a reason. To this end, we shall be examining reason statements of the form ‘that p is a reason for A to φ’, where ‘that p’ denotes some fact. When we cite a particular fact, that p, as a reason in the analysandum, the analysans requires modifying. Otherwise, although it may be true that A has a motive that would be served by φ-ing, he might not have a motive that would be served by φ-ing for the reason that p. Thus we should say ‘that p is a reason for A to φ iff A has a motive which would be served by his φ-ing in virtue of its being the case that p’.

According to the internalist, the truth of a reason statement depends on the obtaining of a certain relation between a fact external to an agent, a fact about his motives, and an action. To adapt a familiar example, the mere fact that this stuff is gin and tonic is not a reason for A to drink it if A has nothing in his S that would be served by drinking gin and tonic. Nor is the fact that A wants a gin and tonic a reason for him to drink this stuff if, for instance, this stuff is petrol. Facts about A’s S and facts external to his S must relate in a particular way, as specified by the internalist analysans, for A to have the relevant reason.

Externalists deny that true reason statements always depend on an agent’s particular motives. Some believe they never do whereas others, like Scanlon, concede that some

---

6 Williams 1981, 104.
7 Williams 2001, 91.
reasons do have “subjective conditions”. Nonetheless, Scanlon thinks that there are other reasons “whose normative force seems not to depend on our motivations”. It is this that makes him an externalist. Note, though, that Scanlon agrees with Williams in a further respect: “failing to see the force of a reason that applies to one need not involve irrationality”. The charge of irrationality, Scanlon urges, is applicable only to someone who “fails to respond to what he or she acknowledges to be relevant reasons”. Irrationality is often construed more broadly so to apply to people who contravene a given substantive conception of reasons. Scanlon agrees with Williams that such people are not thereby irrational; but, unlike Williams, he does think they are rationally criticisable and that we may reasonably apply to them a range of evaluative terms, such as ‘cruel’ or ‘inconsiderate’. Indeed, the correct application of such unfavourable thick ethical concepts presupposes that the person to whom we may apply them has acted in a way (we believe) he had reason not to act. To be open to rational criticism in this second kind of way, then, is to be substantively mistaken and involves a failure to either take into account, or give due weight to, certain reasons. Consider one of Williams’ own examples to illustrate the difference between being irrational and substantively mistaken.

Imagine someone who treats his wife badly and who simply sees no reason to treat her better. The supposition, Scanlon writes, is that “there is nothing in this man’s ‘subjective motivational set’ that would be served by changing his ways”. Even so, he is “the kind of person about whom Williams would allow us to say that he is inconsiderate, cruel, insensitive, and so on”. Our evaluation of him as a cruel husband, according to Scanlon, signals a deficiency on his part – a failure to see certain reasons. He is substantively mistaken about what reasons there are; but he is not irrational since he does not act contrary to reasons he acknowledges. Whereas for Williams the husband has no reason to treat his wife better since there is nothing in his S that would be served by doing so, Scanlon argues that the very fact that treating one’s wife badly is cruel is such a reason. Before turning to his argument, let us make one further point. We have noted in passing that an agent can be substantively mistaken in one of two ways: either by failing completely to see a reason or by failing to appreciate the force of a reason he does see. This distinction is important. If the cruel husband of Williams’ example is mistaken in only this second way, his mistake is of no relevance to the question of whether he has a reason. For if he sees that he has some degree of reason but gives that reason less weight than we believe appropriate, he does have a reason on the internalist criterion. Of course, Scanlon – and probably most of us – want to say that the husband

---

8 Scanlon 1998, 367. Scanlon 1998, 363 characterises Williams’ internalism as the view that “all reasons for action have subjective conditions”.
has especially good reason not to treat his wife badly and that he should give certain reasons more weight. However, as Scanlon himself acknowledges, if his argument is to challenge the internalist, the cruel husband must be someone who has nothing in his S that would be served by avoiding actions because they are cruel. The following two sections examine Scanlon’s argument.

3.

The nub of the argument comes in the following passage in which Scanlon discusses the kind of person about whom Williams would allow us to say that he is inconsiderate, cruel, and so on:16

These criticisms do involve accusing him of a kind of deficiency, namely a failure to be moved by certain considerations we regard as reasons. (What else is it to be inconsiderate, cruel, insensitive, and so on?) If it is a deficiency for the man to fail to see these considerations as reasons, it would seem that they must be reasons for him. (If they are not, how can it be a deficiency for him to fail to recognise them?) Why not conclude that the man has reason to treat his wife better […]17

So let us break down the argument, calling the fact that φ-ing is cruel the fact ‘that p’. Assume that

(1) A fails to see that p as a reason not to φ

Scanlon then thinks that calling someone cruel signals a deficiency. Hence,

(2) if A fails to see that p as a reason not to φ then A is deficient for failing to see that p as a reason not to φ

Therefore,

(3) A is deficient for failing to see that p as a reason not to φ

16 Note the factive language deployed, which may lead one to suspect that Scanlon overtly begs the question. However, the interesting issue is where to locate the deeper source of disagreement between internalist and externalist, for which we will have to sustain the internalist’s claim that the cruel husband might not be deficient at all and for which Scanlon’s argument is a good vehicle.

17 Scanlon 1998, 367. Let us note and correct an equivocation. Scanlon suggests that deficiencies identified by thick ethical concepts such as cruel involve a failure to be moved by reasons. This may be true; but his argument requires something stronger, namely, that the cruel husband fails to be moved because he fails even to see that he has a reason not to act cruelly. If his only deficiency is that he fails to be moved by a reason which he does see (or that he would see were he to deliberate soundly), Williams could agree that he does have that reason. Assume, then, that the husband fails to see any reason not to act cruelly.
Recall now Scanlon’s claim that, ‘If it is a deficiency for the man to fail to see these considerations as reasons, it would seem that they must be reasons for him. (If they are not, how it can be a deficiency for him to fail to recognise them?)’. That is to say, if that p is not a reason for A not to φ then it cannot be a deficiency for A to fail to see that p as a reason not to φ. But because it is a deficiency for A to fail to see that that p is a reason not to φ, that p must be a reason for A not to φ. Hence,

(4) if A is deficient for failing to see that p as a reason not to φ then that p is a reason for A not to φ

And therefore,

(5) that p is a reason for A not to φ

However, I shall argue, the internalist can deny the consequent of (2), in which case he can reject (3) and the antecedent of (4) upon which the conclusion (5) depends.18

4.

Premise (2) tells us that if the husband fails to see the cruelty of φ-ing as a reason not to φ, he is deficient. But why he is deficient is not so clear. To see why, we will have to take a circuitous route and examine what such a person would be like. We shall consider two types of apparent deficiency to which the cruel husband could be subject, only the first of which allows us to say that the cruelty of φ-ing is a reason for him not to φ.

Firstly, then, imagine someone whose only ethical failing is a failure to see the cruelty of φ-ing as a reason not to φ. If this is his only failing, he would see that he has a reason not to φ because φ-ing is nasty, callous, insensitive, or so on. However, such a person would be rather odd and is someone about whom the internalist can agree that the cruelty of φ-ing is a reason for him not to φ. This is because thick ethical concepts are not only action-guiding or normative but world-guided – they possess descriptive content in virtue of which they have correct and incorrect conditions of application – and the descriptive content of ‘cruel’ shares much with many of our other stock concepts. Indeed, there is significant overlap in the meaning of such terms as ‘cruel’, ‘nasty’ and ‘callous’. Those features in virtue of which an action is cruel are also typically features in virtue of which it is nasty or callous. When this is the case, someone who sees the (e.g.) nastiness of φ-ing as a reason not to φ should see the cruelty of φ-ing as a reason not to φ. If he does not, we may rightly suspect that he either lacks sufficient mastery of the concept of cruelty or suffers some further cognitive inability such as an inability to see that, if the nastiness of φ-ing is a reason not to φ and the facts in virtue of

18 Williams 2001, 95–6 actually discusses Scanlon’s argument, but our responses differ significantly.
which φ-ing is nasty make φ-ing cruel, the cruelty of φ-ing is a reason not to φ. Such
cognitive deficiencies offer no impunity from reasons, however. For when the descript-
tive content underwriting judgements of cruelty is sufficiently similar to that of nasti-
ness – a concept the normative force of which the husband does accept – reasons of cru-
elty just are reasons of nastiness. The husband just fails to see this. To emphasise the
point, note that thick ethical concepts also possess evaluative content. To call the hus-
band’s action cruel or nasty, for example, implies that we believe it to merit disap-
proval. If the husband sees that we disapprove and believes he has reason to avoid ac-
tions that incur the disapproval of others then, given sufficient mastery of the concept of
cruelty and absent cognitive inability, he will see the cruelty of his actions as reason-
giving. In short, then, the internalist can agree with Scanlon that the husband whose
only ethical failing involves a failure to see the normative force of a particular thick
ethical concept such as cruelty is cognitively deficient: he either fails to grasp our use of
the concept or suffers some further cognitive inability. Either way, if he accepts that he
has reason not to do those things correctly described in terms of concepts related to, or
implied by, the concept of cruelty (e.g. nastiness, disapproval, and so forth), he does
have a motive which would be served by not φ-ing because φ-ing is cruel. The fact that
φ-ing is cruel is therefore a reason for him not to φ. He just fails to see this.

There is, though, a second kind of person the externalist may wish to indict with a
reason. Unlike the previous person whose deficiency is cognitive, this cruel husband
understands that our application of the term ‘cruel’ both voices disapproval and implies
that we believe he has reason not to φ. However, he simply does not care. He might un-
derstand the relevant concept in, to adapt from Hare, an ‘inverted commas’ sense:

21 while grasping our use of the concept, he remains motivationally indifferent to our
judgements because he doesn’t endorse the evaluative and normative commitments they
presuppose. Does he have a reason to avoid actions we predicate with disadvantageous
thick ethical concepts?

To show this, the externalist needs to show that it is a genuine deficiency for him to
fail to see he has reason to avoid actions described by such concepts. And this takes us
to the heart of the issue. Why is he deficient for lacking certain moral sensibilities that
we value when he may otherwise be perfectly procedurally rational and cognitively
able? Why, for instance, is he deficient rather than ‘deficient’ – the latter reflecting a
deficiency relative only to norms we accept but he does not? Reapplying one of Wil-
liams’ own suggestions, to show that the husband is genuinely deficient (not merely
‘deficient’) for failing to see the cruelty of φ-ing as a reason not to φ, the externalist
“would need to show that the agent has reason to use that concept, to structure his […]

19 If the husband could show there to be a relevant difference between the nastiness and cruelty of φ-ing,
and rejects only reasons of cruelty because he doesn’t care about them, he might not be cognitively
deficient. What I say in discussion of the second type of cruel husband, both in this section and the
next, is relevant here.

20 An application of what Williams 1995, 41ff calls a “proleptic invocation of a reason”.

21 Hare 1952, 124.
experiences in those terms. That is a different, and larger, matter; all the work remains to be done”. 22 This raises many issues, not all of which can be engaged with here (though see §5). But at the very least, it places something of an onus on the externalist to show that concepts like cruelty are concepts to which any rational and cognitively able person has reason to respond. Absent such an account, it remains entirely unclear why this husband is deficient if he fails to do so and why, therefore, he has reason to avoid those actions. And if the internalist can deny that the husband is deficient for failing to see the cruelty of ϕ-ing as a reason not to ϕ, he can reject the consequent of premise (2) of Scanlon’s argument, so that if the antecedent is read factively, it follows that the cruelty of ϕ-ing is not such a reason. (Read non-factively, it is unclear why such a person is deficient in the first place.) Alternatively, if the husband is merely ‘deficient’, Scanlon may, at best, have to replace (3) with

\[(3*) \text{ A is ‘deficient’ for failing to see that } p \text{ as a reason not to } \phi \]

If, however, a mere ‘deficiency’ does not imply a corresponding reason, instead of (4) we get

\[(4*) \text{ if A is ‘deficient’ for failing to see that } p \text{ as a reason not to } \phi \text{ then it’s not the case that that } p \text{ is a reason for A not to } \phi \]

Either the externalist has to accept (4*), in which case Scanlon’s conclusion (5) comes out false, or he must show that at least one of (3*) or (4*) is false. He might seek to do this in one of two ways. He could argue that the husband is deficient and not merely ‘deficient’. Or he could argue that his ‘deficiency’ itself implies he has the relevant reason. However, absent further argument, the first response presupposes that the cruelty of ϕ-ing is a reason for the husband not to ϕ – if it were not, he would not be deficient; but this simply begs the question. The second approach is vulnerable to a similar response: the externalist requires some independent support for this, without which the mere denial of (4*) rests upon the externalist assumption that the cruelty of ϕ-ing is a reason for the husband not to ϕ. So either Scanlon’s argument succeeds only by assuming that that p is a reason, or else further argument is needed to show that the husband is genuinely deficient. Without presupposing some substantive normative truth in virtue of which any rational deliberator would acknowledge the cruelty of an act as a reason not to perform it, it is difficult to see where such an argument may come from.

5.

By way of conclusion, I wish to draw upon the preceding discussion to assess some of the implications internalism has for morality and moral obligation. McDowell and Parfit, among others, take internalism to be problematic since it entails that those who lack

\[22 \text{ Williams 1995, 38.} \]
motives to do that which morality requires have no moral obligations. This is indeed an implication of internalism but we are now in a position to see why such an implication is less problematic than often supposed.

Firstly, most – if not all – people will, as a contingent matter of fact, have the kinds of reasons morality hopes, since most people do have motives to which acting for those reasons speak. Indeed, most of us do care about the disapproval of others and most of us do thereby have reason to avoid such actions – even if, as in the case of the first cruel husband, we sometimes fail to see this. Nonetheless, the externalist may insist, we should reject internalism if it entails that someone like the second husband, who has no motive whatsoever in his S that would be served by avoiding such actions, lacks a corresponding reason or therefore moral obligation. However, the internalist has several responses. For one, as Williams himself puts it, “it is precisely people who are regarded as lacking any general disposition to respect the reactions of others that we cease to blame, and regard as hopeless or dangerous characters.”

And if we cease to blame them – or, more precisely, to regard them as blameworthy – they really do seem to fall outside the realm of moral obligation. Any moral theory that supposes otherwise seems hopelessly optimistic, and Williams is surely correct to say that if someone really is unable to see something we regard as a reason, and so could never act for that reason, to insist he has that reason is little more than “bluff and brow-beating”. Indeed, there is something to the claim (the like of which is to be found in Kant for example) that such people, if there are any, would be so alienated from ethical life that they fail to count as ethical agents in any meaningful sense: they are so unresponsive to ethical norms and reasons that they fall short of what some have called ‘constitutive standards of (ethical) agency’. Nevertheless, such a person seems a rather distant possibility. Concepts like cruelty are so central to the structure and content of ethical life (in a way that other concepts such as chastity or political correctness are not) that it is difficult to imagine how an otherwise cognitively able and rational person who understands our criticisms fails to have at least some motivation and reason to avoid actions correctly described in such terms. Such a character would be so estranged from our values and practices that trying to ‘reason’ with him would have little practical benefit. He may be someone who in practice we have good reason to protect ourselves against; but he would be no more of a problem to moral theory than the traditional crude ethical egoist since he is falls entirely outwith the scope of moral reasons.

So if most people do as a contingent matter of fact have the reasons morality hopes, what kind of challenge does internalism pose? Recall that internalism, as I have presented it, concerns the conditions under which it is true to say of someone that he has a

23 Williams 1995, 43.
24 Williams 2001, 95. Note how this connects with Williams’ emphasis (e.g. 1995, 39) of the interrelation between explanatory and normative reasons.
25 For constitutive arguments, see for example Velleman 1996. Velleman argues that such people fall short of agency altogether but, given that they may be procedurally rational, I recommend the more modest claim that they would fall short of ethical agency.
reason for action in the pro tanto sense of ‘a reason’, where the weight of the reason under analysis is unspecified. Although the argument has been that internalism of this sort is substantively less problematic for morality than often supposed, it would seem to have the following implication. If the truth of all reason statements is contingent on the contents of particular agents’ subjective motivational sets, the weight of any reason may likewise have subjective conditions. The weight of a reason will depend on the weight an individual agent gives it, which will in turn depend on contingent facts about what the agent values, as exemplified by the contents of his S and how those contents are ordered. And this does threaten many entrenched views about morality and moral obligation. It allows that a person might give moral reasons less weight than the moralist believes he ought while giving other reasons more weight. In which case, it appears open to a suitably disposed agent to flout his supposed moral obligations – and the moralist’s worry should be that there may be many such people.

This, I suggest, is where internalism has bite against morality. The challenge facing the externalist is to justify the supremacy of moral reasons and moral obligation. He is required to show not only that we have reason or ought to structure our experiences in terms of certain reasons, but that those reasons have the weight morality claims independently of facts about any particular agents’ motives, such that someone who fails to give those reasons sufficient weight is deficient. In short, the moralist’s externalist project becomes one of showing that we ought to do that which morality claims we ought morally to do. This, as noted, is a larger matter for which all the work remains to be done – it is the task of justifying the supremacy of morality.26

References


26 I am very grateful to my audience at GAP.5 and to those at the University of St. Andrews who commented on an earlier presentation of the ideas, especially to Sarah Broadie, Iwao Hirose, Kent Hurtig, Brian McElwee and John Skorupski.